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ABSTRACT

This self-help manual contains advice for parents who want to improve the schools their children attend by influencing school planning, policy, and administrative practices. The first step in improving schools is deciding whether a new group is necessary. If it is, parents must connect with other parents and then hold a first meeting at which participants define goals and set a plan of action. Once the group has started, it should choose a format for meetings and decision-making that will encourage cooperation and understanding among members. Suggestions for making the group effective and for managing successful, focused meetings are provided next, after which the following steps for influencing public officials to make policy decisions which the group supports are discussed: (1) choosing an issue; (2) gathering information; (3) presenting the issue; (4) negotiating with officials; (5) using the media; and (6) follow-up and evaluation. (PS)

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ORGANIZING for Better Schools

A Primer for Parents

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ORGANIZING FOR BETTER SCHOOLS: A PRIMER FOR PARENTS

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Boston, Massachusetts

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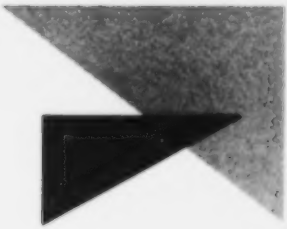
TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	BECOMING INVOLVED	2
	A. Why Do Schools Exist?	2
	B. Do Parents Have the Right to Make Decisions?	2
	C. Why Not Let the Experts Make the Decisions?	3
	D. Why Should You Become Involved?	3
	E. Why Join With Other Parents?	4
III.	THE LARGER CONTEXT	5
IV.	GETTING STARTED	7
	A. Outreach	8
	B. Your First Meeting	9
	C. Planning	10
	D. Action	11
V.	KEEPING YOUR GROUP GOING	13
	A. Types of Groups	13
	B. Choosing a Structure	13
	C. Membership and Legal Status	14
	D. Making a Group Effective	15
	E. Managing Successful Meetings	16
VI.	ACTION STRATEGIES AND SKILLS	18
	A. Choosing an Issue	18
	B. Information Gathering	20
	C. Presenting the Issue	21
	D. Negotiating with Officials	23
	E. Using the Media	24
	F. Follow-up and Evaluation	26
VII.	CONCLUSION	28



I. INTRODUCTION

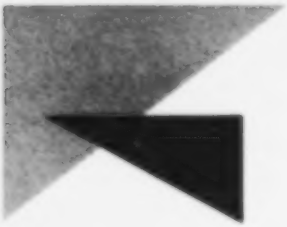
The purpose of this manual is to help parents work together to improve the schools their children attend. It is a self-help manual which discusses some of the basics of organizing on school-related issues. It is also intended to help parents have an impact on school planning, policy and administrative practices.

As citizens, few of us are trained in politics, but as community members we are expected to participate in civic decision-making by voting in elections. Many of us become parents without training in child development or a formal background in educational planning. We may often feel unsure and outside of our experience when faced with school-related problems and issues. Yet, just as we can become politically aware and well-informed, so can we learn about the educational process.

School boards are elected by the public and officially represent the educational interests of the entire community. They must make decisions based upon their perception of what is good for the whole system. While officials are responsible to the community at large and face many political pressures, as parents you are primarily responsible for your children's welfare. Parental viewpoints and interests are more focused. Officials work to see that the system runs efficiently and serves overall needs. Parents can work within that system to see that particular needs are satisfied and not overlooked.

Even if your children are enjoying a positive school experience, becoming involved can make that experience even better. Your participation and that of other concerned parents can add another dimension to your children's education and help improve the schools.

If you are a concerned parent who wishes to improve your child's chances for a good education, this manual — used on your own, with others or with some form of assistance — can help you think through what it is you want to accomplish and how to get it done.



II. BECOMING INVOLVED

A. Why do Schools Exist?

Schooling is required throughout the United States. Schools exist to educate and prepare the young to accept responsibility. As a parent, you see education as a way to ensure a decent future for your child.

Schools benefit children, parents and other interests in the larger society. For example, a democratic form of government depends on citizens to evaluate candidates and issues. Business and industry depend on a skilled workforce capable of following instructions and making work-related decisions.

Schools serve a wide range of interests in society. In this context, parents can play a key role in ensuring an educational process that is sensitive to individual needs.

B. Do Parents Have the Right to Make Decisions?

There would be no public schools without community support. This fact is often overlooked when educational decisions are made. Teachers, parents, students, administrators and other interested citizens all have a vested interest in what goes on in the schools.

Differing opinions and priorities make it unlikely that one segment of the school community can fully represent the interests of all segments. Thus, parents need to speak for themselves and their children.

While parents as individuals may have differences, parents as a segment of the school community, more often than not, tend to share common concerns. As a ready-made interest group, parents can become a vital and powerful force for improving schools. As the person most concerned with your children's future, you have a right to participate in educational policy decisions.

C. Why Not Let the Experts Make the Decisions?

The schools are an important and critical community institution. They can be instruments of social change as well as social control. The quality of education shapes not only your child's individual future, but also the future of your community and your society. You have too much at stake to be uninvolved.

D. Why Should You Become Involved?

A lot of work is needed to make schools as good as you want them to be. When you feel that a change is needed, organizing is a way to share the work and join with others to influence school policy-makers.

Government officials and school administrators are often required to make policy decisions that will affect you and your child. You may not even be aware that these choices are being discussed unless you get involved. By getting involved, you can find out what issues are being considered and what choices are likely to be made.

In some situations, the judicial system or the government may require parent participation on advisory or decision-making committees. Becoming involved will guarantee that your viewpoint is represented, heard and considered.

Further, the more you know about the schools and how they are run, the better able you are to help your child in school, both when there is a problem and when things are going well. Active parents know and are known by school staff and can use their positive influence to make improvements.

As a parent, you are part of the educational process. What you do and say, or don't do and say, will influence the way your child performs in school. At the same time, it can influence school administrators and teachers. Silence can easily be misinterpreted as approval and agreement. Voicing an opinion or concern is less likely to be misinterpreted and may result in a better education for your child.

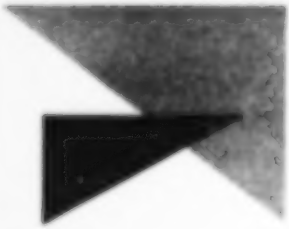
While many parents feel they aren't well informed on school issues, participation is really the best way to learn about the process of educating and to find out how you feel about it.

E. Why Join With Other Parents?

While it is often true that one parent can influence a school's decisions and choices about an individual child, individual influence is generally limited. It tends to happen within the framework of what the school already has to offer. A group action by several parents can begin to influence that framework and result in decisions and choices that can benefit many children.

Parent groups come together around a wide range of issues and shared concerns. Their focus may be as broad as "quality education" or as limited as "the need for gym equipment in the high school."

One person may find a task difficult or impossible to accomplish, but a group of people can split up the work and keep time commitments reasonable. As a result, you may want to find out if other parents have similar concerns and consider a group effort.



III. THE LARGER CONTEXT

If you are already involved in community affairs, you may well be aware that schools and school officials do not operate in isolation. Your school system is not only influenced by the forces in your local community, it also reacts to pressures from outside of it.

The factors which make up this larger context are political, legal, economic and social in nature. They ultimately affect the attitudes, finances, programs and administration of your local school system. Federal, state and municipal governments, teacher unions and courts all influence and shape decisions on school policy and administration. Their influence can extend to school budgets, community resources, social concerns, and issues of quality and equality of education.

There are many places where these interests overlap and can even compete. This is often the case with governmental agencies which oversee public education. These agencies make rules and regulations that govern school systems. They use various measures and incentives, usually financial, to ensure that the rules are obeyed.

Both federal and state education departments are required to monitor and enforce education laws passed by the United States Congress and the state legislatures. Further, they are responsible for dispensing money appropriated by the legislative branch for the schools.

In general, the legislative branch of government makes laws and appropriates money, and the administrative branch implements laws and spends the money. At the local level, the school committee is legally responsible for implementing state and federal laws and for developing a spending plan, or school budget, funded and approved by the local town or city government.

The judicial branch can also become involved in education. Individuals, groups, non-profit organizations and government agencies have brought lawsuits in state and federal courts to require compli-

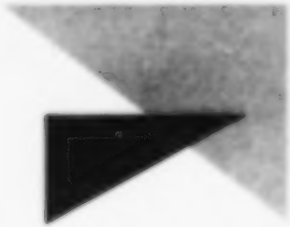
ance with school-related laws. For example, in some cities, lawsuits have been used to bring about desegregation and bilingual education. They have sometimes resulted in court-ordered plans affecting the daily operation of entire school systems.

The state of the economy also influences the schools. It limits local resources available for education, the amount of state and federal aid to education, and affects the severity of community needs to which schools must respond. Economic factors, a decline in the number of school-age children, and shifts in the make-up of a particular community affect budget allocations in both rich and poor school systems. Economic factors can also affect social, racial and ethnic relations within communities.

Economic concerns also affect teachers. Teacher unions play an important part in shaping school practices. Issues that affect teacher unions on a national level, or gains made by unions in other parts of the state, will eventually have an influence on the local school picture. It is important to keep in mind that while the interests of teachers often do not conflict with the interests of students and parents, their interests may not always be identical.

Finally, changing trends in educational philosophy can have a significant effect on decision-making at the local level. For instance, studies occasionally focus national attention on problems in the public schools. These studies may arouse or perhaps echo a conservative swing in public opinion regarding the schools and educational policy. For parents who are concerned with equal access and quality education, these reports can present both an opportunity and a challenge. If a study examines a decline in literacy, it can be used to demonstrate the need for new reading programs on the local level. If a study questions the impact of English as a Second Language classes, it may present a challenge to parents who have found these classes to be valuable.

Viewing your school as part of a complex whole is vital. For better or worse, a school is subject to many outside pressures.



IV. GETTING STARTED

You may feel the need for support, from a group of parents who share your concerns, in order to accomplish some goal or even to air your grievances to school officials. You may want the power of numbers behind you on a particular issue, or you may need help in developing an idea.

Whether you want to organize parents around a single issue or a range of issues, the process is similar. In either case, you should start by thinking through these questions:

- Do you need a new group or are there existing parent organizations that could serve the purpose?
- If no suitable group exists, how will your new group relate to already established organizations?
- How well defined are your goals? Are you willing to modify your goals in order to get more representation from parents?
- How many active people will it take to do what you have in mind?
- Do you need a permanent organization or an ad hoc (short-term) task force?
- What is a rough timetable for achieving your goals and how much time are you asking people to commit to the parent group?

The more prepared you are to answer these kinds of questions, the more realistic you will be as an organizer and the more likely you will be to succeed. This chapter provides the basics for getting started; Chapters V and VI are more detailed.

A. Outreach: Connecting With Other Parents

All organizing begins with outreach. It is the most essential part of any organizing effort. It is also something that continues throughout the life of every healthy, well-functioning organization. Attracting, keeping and expanding your membership is necessary if you intend to build an effective group.

Your initial outreach activities might follow this sort of pattern:

- You and one or two other people have identified some concerns and would like to work together with a larger group of parents.
- You have put your concerns into a written form so that they are clear, easy to understand and usable as a base for discussion.
- You contact other parents and try to interest them in your ideas. You speak to other parents after school or call them on the telephone about your concerns. By sharing experiences, analyzing the problem and exploring possible solutions, you begin to identify potential supporters as well as clarify your own thinking.
- It will take time to sell the idea of forming a parent group. Use this lead time to bring your concerns to the attention of other people (visibility) and to identify yourself with the issues (credibility). For instance, you might write a letter to the editor of your local paper or speak out at a public meeting (such as a school committee session).
- When you think you know enough interested parents, it is time to plan your first meeting. Set a date, time and place. Develop and distribute a notice about the meeting. Invite people by phone and, if possible, by mail too. You might also put the notice in parent-oriented newsletters, local newspapers or church bulletins. If available use mailing lists and membership lists of local organizations that might attract parents with similar interests.
- Keep a list of everyone you've contacted. Make sure you follow up on each one by contacting them just prior to the meeting to

ask if they plan to attend. If your list of contacts is too large, ask a few other parents to help with the calling.

B. Your First Meeting

Group consensus is a procedure that requires members to agree on their goals. This should start at the group's first meeting. At this stage, difficulty in expressing your purpose or reaching agreement on it can prevent a group from ever getting off the ground, or can start your group off with a shaky foundation.

As the organizer of this meeting, your role is to take responsibility for presenting a clear statement of (1) the purpose of the meeting and (2) what specific outcomes you hope to have when the meeting is over. Basically, there are three possible conclusions to such a meeting:

1. The group decides to organize and the next steps are arranged.
2. The group decides to meet again to discuss organizing.
3. The group decides not to organize.

The only unacceptable conclusion to your first meeting is to adjourn without deciding on one of these three options.

Usually, first meetings lack structure and agreement on a decision-making process. One way to keep the meeting on track is to

prepare and distribute a detailed agenda and stick to it. The agenda should allow enough time for group members to (1) get all their concerns and views on the table and (2) explore various strategies for working on these problems. Minimally, the agenda should include:

- Welcoming Remarks: Tell people who you are and thank them for taking the time to come.
- Introductions: Ask each person to state their name and any information about themselves they would like the others to know. While doing this, it is helpful to pass around name tags and a sign-in sheet.
- Statement of Purpose: Explain the concerns and reasons for calling the meeting.
- Discussion: Ask the others what they think about your concerns. Try to come to agreement on an issue or range of issues. Then try to develop consensus on your specific goals. Discuss strategies to accomplish your goals. Decide on your next step. Assign duties if necessary.
- Closing Remarks: Summarize the meeting. Make certain that everyone understands and is in agreement on what happened. Set a time, place and purpose for the next meeting.

C. Planning

If all went well at the initial meeting, people decided to work together. Arrangements were made for the next meeting and your organizing efforts moved into the planning phase. But before the group can decide what actions to take, it will need clearly defined goals and a plan of action.

This plan should be put in writing and become your group's working document. It will be the basis for your continuing efforts. Your plan should describe the present situation, your goals, the strategy you will use to accomplish the goals and how you plan to evaluate your accomplishments. Action plans are needed for both long-

term and short-term projects and are vital to a group's success. Two outlines of action plans follow:

	PLAN A	PLAN B
Present Situation	Special Education violations are rampant.	No money for sports equipment, so the program was cut.
Goal	To have the school attain compliance with Special Education laws within two years.	To get the sports program back in the high school by the end of February.
Strategy	Develop proof of violations. Negotiate improvements. Bring suit, if necessary. Have remedies implemented by court order, if suit is successful.	Raise money for equipment by sponsoring a carnival, yard sale or bake sale.
Evaluation	Monitoring shows 50% fewer violations.	Money raised. Equipment purchased. Program restored.

Plan A is a long-term project. It involves work at local, state and federal levels, and could take many months or years to accomplish. Plan B would proceed quickly and involve planning and carrying out one major fundraising event.

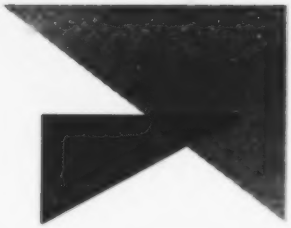
D. Action

Careful planning, by itself, will not ensure that your group's goals will be accomplished. At some point, your group must take actions that are public and perhaps controversial. Because no one can anticipate every possible outcome, newly organized groups need to guard against the trap of being bogged down by the fear of not being perfect. Prepare carefully but realize that you have to be willing to take a chance. If you make a mistake, you will learn from it.

There may be many steps involved in implementing the action

plan. These steps are the tactics you will use to implement your strategy and every step should contribute to accomplishing your goal. If your strategy does not produce the desired result, the steps may require re-thinking and revision.

As an organizer, you should be particularly aware that groups are easily sidetracked. You may need to remind the group of its reasons for organizing to keep it moving towards its goal. This is when your written plan can be very helpful. It will serve to remind people of their organizational goals and help keep the group on track.



V. KEEPING THE GROUP GOING

Much time and energy can be wasted dealing with misunderstandings within your newly formed group. As a result, it is important to choose a format for meetings and decision-making that will encourage cooperation and understanding among group members.

A. Types of Groups

There are many ways to structure your group. Answering the following questions will help you think through how your group will function and what name the group should adopt:

1. What issues will the group address?
2. How will your group make decisions?
3. Who will speak for the group and under what circumstances?
4. How will the group deal with school or governmental authorities?
5. Should you characterize yourselves as an association, union, task force, committee or coalition?
6. Do you wish to act as an advisory, advocacy, service, support or study group?
7. Will you develop opinions and advise officials on issues, champion a cause, provide a service, raise funds, meet to discuss common concerns or learn more about specific issues?

B. Choosing a Structure

The size and purpose of your group will be key factors in deciding what structure makes the most sense for getting things done. Usually, a simple structure that provides fair and accountable decision-making and delegation of work is the best choice. Small, single-issue groups do not require as formal a structure as large, multi-issue groups. A small group might decide to make all decisions by

consensus, while a larger group might feel that the majority vote should prevail. No matter what its size, a group may wish to elect officers or appoint a steering committee to officially represent the membership.

If your group has a dozen members working only to raise funds to finance school trips, you do not need to create an elaborate organizational structure. However, if you have managed to interest fifty people in working to get the sports program back, you need a more formal structure to provide direction and ensure that things get done. For this reason, the group will need to decide who has the authority to (1) assign tasks and (2) determine that the assignments have been done. In this situation, group members may wish to elect a president or officers.

C. Membership and Legal Status

Other issues to be considered when developing an organizational structure include membership requirements and legal status.

Membership can be open or closed. An open membership means that any interested person can join the group. Conversely, a closed membership means that people who wish to join must meet certain qualifications. For example, membership can be by invitation, by election, or limited to parents or residents of a particular neighborhood. Specifically, parent groups should carefully assess the advantages and disadvantages of opening membership to non-parents, such as teachers, school administrators or town officials.

Your group may want to incorporate as a non-profit organization. This may be necessary if you want to seek private or public funding. Becoming a non-profit, tax-exempt organization provides a legal status that will continue even if the membership changes. It involves filing documents with both state and federal agencies. You should incorporate only after serious review and discussion with a lawyer or legal aid office. In addition to filing the documents required to create the non-profit corporation, you will need to file with the Internal Revenue Service to obtain tax-exempt status. Later, you will be required to file various reports on an annual basis.

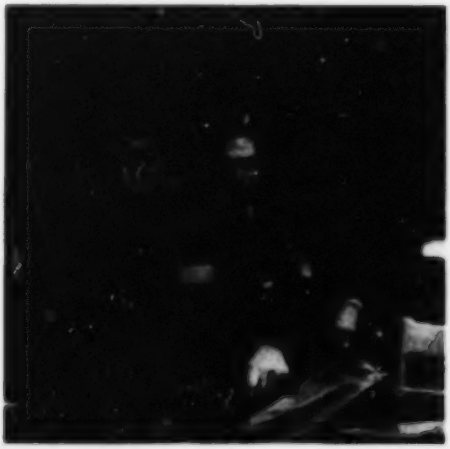
D. Making a Group Effective

In order to make your group effective, you should consider its role in relationship to existing parent groups, governmental agencies and teacher unions. In the long run, you may choose to cooperate with, ignore or even actively oppose other groups and agencies. Whatever the choice, the very existence of your group may be at risk, so give careful consideration to this matter.

Newly organized parent groups face many hazards. As an example, some fail to be effective because they do not understand how to develop and use influence. You are accustomed to seeing teachers, administrators or other authority figures in control. "Taking charge" can feel very uncomfortable if you are not used to doing so.

Groups gain influence and credibility by being positive and issue-oriented. When a group carries out a plan and becomes involved in problem-solving, it shows potential supporters and detractors that the group is serious.

In large and diverse communities, parents can have problems working together. Even when parents know that a strong common interest unites them, divisions can occur because of differences in language, race and income. You will need to be particularly sensitive to the ways prejudice and mistrust are often used politically to keep parents divided, weak and ineffective.



Bridging the cultural communication gap is vital and often requires a lot of effort on the part of group members. It also requires awareness and understanding on the part of the group leader. However, a united multi-cultural parent group has distinct political advantages, is fairer, is open to more people and is always worth the organizing effort.

Another key to being effective is building dynamic leadership. A leader or set of leaders must create a non-threatening, supportive environment within the group so that people can work together. You must bring out the best in each member, reinforce positive discussion and support individual contributions. You must also be ready to contribute more time and energy than the other members. The community, as well as group members, will view the leaders as the group's spokespeople—the symbols of what the group stands for.

E. Managing Successful Meetings

One of the leader's most important functions is to run effective, focused meetings. Specific suggestions for making meetings successful include:

- *Prepare ahead of time.* This means everything from double-checking the room, the refreshments and the agenda, to prethinking the task assignments and anticipating possible conflicts between members.

- *Be ready to help the group break the required work down into manageable tasks.* Try to make certain that each member understands how his or her task fits into the larger picture. Be ready to explain why accomplishing each task will move the group toward its goal. Ask yourself: What is step one? What do we need to do to accomplish it? How can I help people to do it?

- *Make sure the group establishes a realistic schedule.* A schedule that does not allow enough time and is sure to be unmet will discourage future activities. It will make the group feel like it has failed. On the other hand, a successful experience will motivate group members to keep on working.

- *Be sensitive to why people are there.* It is important to recognize that people get involved for different reasons. Reasons for

participating can vary from a sense of civic responsibility to a chance to socialize, from a way to get attention to a desire to accomplish a specific goal.

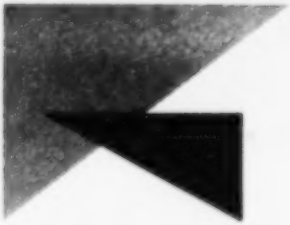
- *Realize that individuals play different roles in meetings.* Do not let participants upset or anger you. It is your job to keep the meeting moving. Also, remember that people can play more than one role at the same meeting. Some common roles include presenting issues, observing, identifying pitfalls, obstructing and mediating.

- *Keep track of the time and keep the meeting focused.* Allow enough time to introduce the agenda, discuss the issues and summarize results. Try to make sure that members do not monopolize the meeting or repeat points already discussed. You should also be careful to keep to the agenda and prevent members from squabbling among themselves.

- *Encourage everyone to participate.* Try to create an atmosphere of mutual support and trust by reinforcing good suggestions or asking listeners for their opinions. Do not allow one member to monopolize the discussion. Try to build on individual members' ideas.

- *Try to end the meeting in an organized way that sets the stage for the next meeting.* Avoid leaving any loose ends. Make sure to summarize what happened, identify the next step, go over any task assignments and set a time and place for the next meeting.

Finally, clearly defining your issue—and sticking to it—is critical to your group's success because educational issues can be very complicated. It is often difficult to separate educational issues from political or social issues, but it is important to do so. Your group should focus on its goal and not become overly distracted by secondary issues.



VI. ACTION STRATEGIES AND SKILLS

Most parent groups are not formally elected or appointed to act on the public's behalf and, therefore, cannot officially make or implement public policy. Organized citizen groups can, however, influence responsible public officials to make policy decisions which the groups support. The strategies suggested here are designed to help parent groups move in this direction.

A. Choosing an Issue

When setting priorities, try to pick an issue that your group can win on for its first campaign. A successful first try will bolster the group's confidence and establish its credibility in the community. Success often attracts supporters. People who stood on the sidelines waiting to see how the group would do are now more likely to step forward. Factors that help to make an issue suitable for a first campaign include:

- Simplicity: An easily understood problem or solution is vital.
- Immediate Danger: Clear potential for harm to a segment of the population gives an issue a sense of urgency.
- Access: The ability to reach the people who have the authority to carry out your solution is crucial.
- Support: The potential level of public or professional support for your solution is critical.

If an issue has some of these qualities, it may be possible to create the rest. For instance, it may become part of your strategy to build public support for your recommended solution.

As an example, let us consider a parent group in a small desegregating city. The group, which wants to try to improve minority

access to special programs in the schools, might encounter the following:

- A need to improve reading and math scores on basic skills tests, reduce dropout and suspension rates, and increase the percentage of students going on to college.
- The need to improve school climate and learning environments. Improvements could be measured by a decrease in violent incidents and vandalism, improved school maintenance, higher teacher morale, better student motivation, or better communication with teachers and administrators.
- A need to address the tensions and inequities of race, class and culture. Problems and issues might include affirmative action in teacher and administrative hiring, racially motivated violence, discriminatory school discipline practices, disproportionate placement of minorities in special education or basic classes, or racial and cultural divisiveness in general.
- In addition, other special programs would vie with these issues for the attention and involvement of the parents. Priorities for an upgraded curriculum might include multicultural education, special education, bi-lingual education, computer science programs, vocational programs, alternative high schools, gifted and talented programs, physical education and athletics, arts and music, or improvements to the regular academic curriculum.

Involved parents might want to make their voices heard on these or other issues. They might feel it important to make their opinion heard on teacher contract negotiations, the selection of principals or school budgets.

In deciding on an issue, they would quickly discover the need to influence decision-making at the local school, central administrative and school committee levels. Later, they might come to realize the potential for affecting educational policy-makers at the state level.

Clearly, with this wide a field for action, two things are needed to help parent groups become effective: (1) narrowing the focus to a manageable scale; and (2) learning about the specific educational decision-making processes.

Parent groups must ask themselves the following:

1. What decisions do we want to influence?
2. Who makes those decisions?
3. What are the process and the criteria for making the decisions?
4. What is the timetable for the decisions?
5. What parts of the process can we influence?
6. To what extent can the decisions be influenced? By what factors? By what methods?

Remember, you don't have to know everything about every issue to be effective. You only have to know a lot about your issue, and enough about related issues that might affect your strategy.

B. Information Gathering

Having information is a form of power. One of the reasons public officials and professionals have influence is that they have ready access to information needed to make informed decisions. In order to influence decisions, parent groups must also have information. You must know at least as much about your issue as the opposition does. More, if possible. In fact, it is quite possible for you to know more about your issue than the officials do for two reasons: (1) you have access to the same official information sources they have, and (2) you only have to know this one issue while, for the most part, public officials are responsible for a much broader range of issues.

You must learn how to gain access to information from public sources and combine it with information available from private sources. The following guidelines relate primarily to information that you may need to obtain from official sources:

- Questions: To find relevant information, you must first identify the questions you want to be able to answer. Try to anticipate the questions your group will be asked. Then, you can identify the information sources necessary for answering the questions.
- Answers: You will need to spend time researching your answers at public agencies and libraries. Most agencies have

public information offices to aid private citizens in using public data. Consult the government listings in your telephone directory and call to find out if they have what you need. Be persistent and patient. Research can be tedious, and the overlapping responsibilities of government agencies can make information-gathering both confusing and frustrating.

- Access: State and federal Freedom of Information regulations require public agencies to make available to the public much of the information they have. Generally, documents are not available under these laws if they are planning, incomplete or draft materials, or if they reveal confidential data about individuals. The Freedom of Information laws often require that a request for information be made by letter. There is usually a specified timeframe within which an agency must act. Contact the agency's information or legal office to find out about the request procedure. Do not be put off if the agency moves slowly.

- Analysis: The next important phase is analyzing the information so that you understand it. You may need to get outside assistance from a specialist, who is supportive of your goals, to review what you have and what it does or does not prove. Group members may be knowledgeable in the area you are researching; if not, they may know someone who is. Also, reviewing the data with group members will be helpful in generating more questions to research.

- Conclusions: The conclusions that you draw from the data should result in specific recommendations for solving the problem. You should be able to identify (1) what must be done, (2) by whom, and (3) by when.

C. Presenting the Issue

To be effective, you should carefully plan how you will present your information. Your objectives are (1) to generate public momentum and (2) to influence those who have the authority to act on the information. Sometimes parents lose on an issue, after researching it and becoming knowledgeable, because they find themselves able to talk only to other experts on the issue. Therefore, how you present information is very important.

You might consider the following ways of presenting information to influence officials and gain public support:

- Put the information into a useful and permanent form. This could mean writing an investigative report, a position paper or, if you have some funding, producing a slide/tape presentation.
- Sponsor a public event. You can keep your issue public and alive by staging a media event, public hearing, debate or demonstration.
- Run an educational campaign. This could involve speaking to other local groups, publishing and distributing informational pamphlets or flyers, or contacting and appearing on local radio community affairs programs.
- Frame the issue in your terms. Some hints for this include talking about "administrative accountability" when the officials talk about "fiscal responsibility," or about the "cost of vandalism" when they talk about "budget constraints."

need to identify ways to measure success. For example, you may want to consider the size of your original membership against your present membership, or the number of people who knew about your group and its position at the beginning compared to now. The amount of money raised, the number of children graduating from high school, or a decline in reports of violence in the classroom are other examples of ways to measure a group's success.

Based on your assessment, you can then evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy you chose and decide if it should be continued or changed. At this point, you will be well on your way towards becoming a skilled organizer.

VII. CONCLUSION

Parent organizing often begins on a small scale. Creating interest, building support, organizing a working group, planning for action and accomplishing a goal, all take time, concern and steady work. By becoming involved, you can improve your child's learning opportunities. By making the effort to identify issues, research problems and develop solutions, you can organize a group strong enough to influence educational policy-decisions. Educational excellence requires your participation. As a parent, your voice needs to be heard.

D. Negotiating with Officials

When negotiating with school officials, always remember that access does not necessarily guarantee influence. While maintaining friendly relations and open communication with school administrators is important and beneficial, it should not be a substitute for getting action on your issues. At some point, "nice feelings" might have to be sacrificed to make real progress.

The following is a checklist of things to do:

BEFORE THE MEETING

- ☐ Know what you want to accomplish and be ready to propose solutions
- ☐ Prepare the agenda
- ☐ Decide who will attend the meeting (when negotiating, more than one person should attend)

DURING THE MEETING

- ☐ Be prepared to lead the discussion
- ☐ State your concerns and expectations as clearly as possible
- ☐ Listen to responses
- ☐ Take notes
- ☐ Propose solutions
- ☐ Consider the benefits of compromise, without giving up any right you and your group already enjoy
- ☐ Determine how your group can be supportive of the officials' plan or request

AFTER THE MEETING

- ☐ Write a letter to officials confirming what was said and noting areas of agreement
- ☐ Inform group members of what was accomplished
- ☐ Schedule a follow-up meeting to review progress
- ☐ Keep track of what is or is not being accomplished

E. Using the Media

The media can be used effectively as part of your group's strategy. Press conferences and written press releases can be used to present your story to the public as well as to announce a major victory or publicize an important report. In addition, letters to the editor provide a way to contradict arguments or correct inaccurate statements made about your group.

The media can be used to publicize your group's issue and solution in different ways. For example, there can be coverage in editorials and feature stories in newspapers. This can be difficult to arrange but is not impossible. You must try to convince the editors that you are doing something unique or important. In addition, radio and television talk shows or community service programs are a good way to reach large numbers of the public. Radio stations are easier to approach than television stations, and radio programmers are often actively looking for new program material.

The following are some suggestions that can be helpful when dealing with the media:

- Keep press deadlines in mind when submitting written materials. Call the publication or station to check on what their deadlines are.
- Schedule press conferences so that reporters can meet deadlines. Between 9:30 and 11:00 in the morning, and 2:00 and 4:00 in the afternoon, Monday through Thursday, are good times. Major newscasts tend to take place at noon and at 6:00 p.m.
- Plan to have notices of press conferences arrive at newspapers and radio or television stations no more than two days before the event. Call the assignment or news desk the day before the event to encourage attendance.
- Try to avoid releasing important news on weekends and Fridays. This is because Mondays and Saturdays are considered "dead" news days.
- Try to schedule press announcements so that you are not competing with other newsworthy events such as the World Series or presidential primaries.

- Put as many important facts as possible at the beginning of the release. Fit as much information as you can into the first paragraph. Journalistic editing chops off the endings of press releases to fit them into available space. Always try to address the questions of who, what, why, where and when in the first two paragraphs. Try to make your press release one page and be certain to include, near the top of the page, the name and address of your group and the name and phone number of the person to be contacted for additional information.

- When writing a press release, use quotations from a prominent person who represents your group or issue. Quotes make an article more interesting and easier to read.

- Keep in touch with reporters who have shown interest in covering your issues. If you help them by providing background information for your stories, they will be more likely to follow your issues. Do your homework and provide accurate information. The easiest way to ruin press relations is to give a reporter inaccurate or misleading information.

- Keep issues and comments as simple and straightforward as possible. State your main points clearly. Describe your concerns and explain your proposed solutions. Do not become sidetracked or confused by reporters who are not familiar with your issue.

- Finally, never assume that your information will be portrayed accurately. Quotations, for example, often appear out of context. There are risks associated with using the media, but the benefits of reaching large numbers of people are often worthwhile.

In short, a sympathetic and timely article in a local newspaper, or a sixty-second spot on the six o'clock news, can help bring your concerns before the public eye and bolster support for your group. On the other hand, one uncomplimentary article can undo a lot of hard work. Media use should be approached carefully. Media campaigns should be well-planned.

F. Follow-up and Evaluation

After your group makes a successful step towards its goal, you must continue the organizing process for the next action. In addition, you should follow up and emphasize your gains by identifying and publicizing the group's successes.

If your actions were successful, publicize them. If they were partly successful, tell people about it and let them know that the group intends to keep on working. Something positive must have happened and it is very important for the group's morale to focus on success. With more people attracted to you because of your energy and commitment, momentum will build and your next try will be more successful.

Periodically, it may also be necessary to remind yourselves of your reasons for organizing and renew the group's commitment to its goals. After completing any major action, it is particularly important to evaluate the group's progress and re-confirm the group's purpose and strategy.

Your evaluation can be a formal document or informal discussion. Whatever method you choose, you should be concerned with measuring your progress by comparing where you were at the start to where you are now in relation to your goal. To do this, you will